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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 009366

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DHAHRAN SENDS  
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [KMPI](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: EP BUSINESSWOMEN TAKE FIRST LOOK AT NEW  
OPPORTUNITIES AT THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

REF: A. JEDDAH 4925 (NOTAL)  
[1](#)B. RIYADH 5240 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Following the trend in Jeddah and Riyadh, the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce elections in early February will be open to women, both as voters and as candidates. As of December 17, out of a total of 44 candidates five are women. December 18th is the last day to register. The EP Chamber of Commerce has held information sessions for businesswomen, both for members of the small advisory group to the chamber on women,s issues and for the larger membership. Some businesswomen remain skeptical as to the benefits of this development. End Summary.

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INTRODUCING ELECTIONS TO SAUDI WOMEN IN THE EP  
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[1](#)2. (U) On December 12th the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce held a special information session for the chamber's 20-person advisory group for women,s issues. This session was to encourage women to run for the board. Another information session was held on December 17th, and was open to all of the businesswomen registered with the Chamber. This session included information on how to register as a candidate and a voter, the selection of election monitors, the timeline of related events, and how to fill out ballots.

[1](#)3. (C) Some women remain skeptical, both of the process and of the candidates. "What's the advantage to fighting for one spot on an 18-member board with 6 people appointed by the government?" asked Ghaida Al Juraifani, a female business owner in Al Khobar. Al Juraifani runs her own training and consulting business from her home. For the past two years she has been part of the advisory group of 20 women. She told the PAO that when she asked "What do members of the chamber do?" the presenter replied "Members can go to conferences and the trip will be paid for by the Chamber of Commerce".

[1](#)4. (C) Similar skepticism was portrayed during the information session open to the entire membership. Forty businesswomen attended this session, which was focused on information needed by voters, rather than candidates. (Note and comment: Two men presented to the group of women, and while pictures were "absolutely not allowed", most of the women did not wear face veils during the mixed session. This in itself was unusual; no workshop sponsored by the Ministry of Education, for instance, would have allowed men and women in the same room. End note and comment.)

[1](#)5. (C) The women were interested in the details of the eligibility conditions and complained about the short notice of their participation. Princess Masha'al bint Faisal bin Turki, a businesswoman who works in education, said that as a result the government should appoint more women than men. "The men will be angry," laughed the presenter, who worked in the Ministry of Industry's Chamber of Commerce Department. "Let the men be angry!" replied the princess. One woman from the Shi'a town of Qatif asked what the purpose of running would be, beyond just having the prestige of the position. "What does the board actually do?" The presenters had little to say in response.

[1](#)6. (C) The five female candidates include women who are members of prominent families but do not necessarily run businesses. "I'm not voting for any of the women," said Al Juraifani. "Why should I? None of them knows anything about business." The real way to support progress for women, according to Al Juraifani, is to support the training and development of female entrepreneurs, so that there would be qualified women to run for office.

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SLOW STARTS  
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17. (SBU) The Jeddah and Riyadh Chambers of Commerce allowed women to participate in elections earlier this year, although female candidates were not allowed in Riyadh. In both places, small fractions of the total women registered as members turned up to vote (ref A). In the Eastern Province, 700 women are listed as members of the Chamber of Commerce, and the official from the Ministry of Industry said that about 350 of these meet all of the conditions to be eligible to vote. According to Al Juraifani just 100 are active businesswomen and 50 regularly show up for the 'Women's Center' meetings (ref B).

18. (C) In the EP, five women have signed up to run so far; the last day to register as a candidate is December 18th. The problem, says Juraifani, is that there are no platforms, no positions; people have no additional information about what candidates stand for. Generally, Juraifani said, the women know even less about the male candidates. Still, the Chamber of Commerce is trying to do some democracy training. The Businesswomen's Center at the Chamber of Commerce has invited the female candidates from Jeddah to share their experience with elections.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
GFOELLER